

From Suffering to Joy in Christ's Righteousness

As part of the international celebration of the Millennium back in 2000 A.D., the History Channel, a television station viewed in dozens of countries, listed what it believed to be the top 100 most influential people in the last 1000 years. These secular historians selected Martin Luther as the third most influential person in the last millennium!

Most historians of religion know Luther suffered severely from physical ailments. Yet, few people realise the spiritual struggle and suffering this famous Reformer endured, especially during his early years.

In his more mature years Luther wrote:

In the monastery we had enough to eat and to drink, but the heart and conscience suffered pain and martyrdom, and the sufferings of the soul are the most painful... I believed that I would have to do good works until Christ was rendered gracious to me through them... I could not make myself believe anything but that I had offended God, whom I would have to make favourable again through my good works (Luther and His Times, E. G. Schwiebert, p. 150 and 154; Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis, MO. 1950).

Luther became desperate! He confessed that sometimes in his early struggle, he would lock himself up for two or three entire days at a time. He would neither eat nor drink until he had completed his prayers. His head became so heavy that he, in agony and confusion, would not be able to close his eyes for five nights.

Luther was so empty of strength and filled with anxiety that, at least on one occasion, he was found on the floor of his cell, almost unconscious. Why was he experiencing such horrible spiritual suffering? Historians tell us that Luther certainly had heard of Jesus. He had heard many sermons and read numerous books which made constant references to sin, heaven, and hell. Here was Luther's problem, the root of his hellish anxiety: he was suffering spiritual torture because he had a wrong idea of Jesus. He saw Jesus as one who demanded a human righteousness based on the Law of God rather than as the One who offers the gift of perfect righteousness accomplished through His sacrificial death and resurrection.

Then things changed dramatically. As Luther pondered the living Word of God, the Spirit was at work. The darkness of suffering lifted and the healing light of Jesus shone upon him. This Word of God enabled Luther to realise that his salvation was not in a righteousness he would accomplish. Rather, the righteousness which would save him would be the righteousness God would give Him through His gift of faith, and this righteousness is the perfect righteousness of Jesus.

Suddenly, Luther felt like St. Paul, who, when he realised he was now in Christ, rejoiced in "*not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith,*" (Philippians 3:9).

There are thousands, maybe even millions of people, who claim to be Christians and who, like Luther, suffer quietly and often privately. With deep anguish they try to please God. Yet they have no assurance that their works of righteousness are adequate to please God.

If you are one of these people, you can understand the hellish suffering of Martin Luther. However, the Good News is that like Luther, and on the basis of God's living and life-giving Word in Christ, you can live each day with the joy and assurance of "*not having a righteousness of [your] own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith,*" (Philippians 3:9). Through this life-giving Word God can and will heal you, for "*He sent His Word and healed them,*" (Psalm 107:20).